

Cavani's "Night Porter": A Woman's Film?

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# Cavani's Night Porter: A Woman's Film?

Of the two Italian women film-makers whose work is known in the US, Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmüller, only the latter is being interviewed and written about while her films (*Love and Anarchy*, *The Seduction of Mimi*, *Seven Beauties*) are shown with both popular success and the critics' seal of approval. Cavani was in New York long enough to witness the destruction of her superb and best film to date, *The Night Porter*, and (I presume) to decide never to set foot in this country again. In the US *The Night Porter* was brutally murdered, by pandering advertising and inept critiques. Its reception in America was a disgrace. It revealed a total lack of historical, social, and artistic awareness in the critics who, alas, set the tone for most bourgeois viewers (and of course virtually no working class people ever saw *The Night Porter*).

This critical failure is our loss as well. Billed as a sado-masochistic thriller, romantic pornography, hypnotically repellent—something somewhere in between *Deep Throat* and *The Exorcist* (it ran 24 hours a day in New York, surpassing even *Last Tango in Paris*)—*The Night Porter* was purposely avoided by many people, including many women who were unwilling to put up with what they believed to be yet another slick item of female sexploitation. On their part, highbrow critics begrudgingly admitted the film's technical mastery, but were quick to place Cavani's style in a smug fit between Visconti and Bertolucci, implying "nothing but a competent imitation of her (male) masters." Of course.

It is necessary to talk about Cavani's film, not only because in other countries many critics and viewers consider it a great movie (and they cannot all be artistically unsophisticated or sexually aberrant), but because it is more profoundly a woman's

film than *Cries and Whispers*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Love and Anarchy*, and many other recent films by and about women. What I mean by a woman's film is a film that deals with female experience from within, that investigates the deeper strata of female experience, that seeks answers, causes, and the dialectic nature of that experience rather than presenting only a surface, whether polished or scarred. Furthermore, a woman's film today will not, like Pasolini's *Medea* or Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*, propose a female experience as a myth of origins or a metaphor for The Human Condition. That simply retells something we already know and have heard since the beginning of history, for always woman has been a character in the myths and artistic creations of men, either as a projection of their self or as the Other, the symbol of all that is different from man, hence unknowable, alien, dangerous and/or desirable.

In *The Night Porter* it is not Lucia's experience (her victimization, initiation, and subsequent unbreakable bondage to her oppressor-Father-lover) that serves as a metaphor for the infamy perpetrated by the Nazis on humankind, but Nazism



*The Night Porter* is distributed by Avco-Embassy (35mm) and Swank Motion Pictures (16mm).

and the atrocities committed in the camps that are the allegorical framework chosen by Cavani to investigate the dialectics of the male-female relationship in our contemporary, post-Nazi, society.

What seemed to shock many critics was precisely this: as Cavani stated (see Grace Lichtenstein's article, *New York Times*, October 31, 1974), *The Night Porter* is a love story, not the stupid, sappy, stereotyped Eric Segal kind, but a mature and complex view of love as guilt, selflessness, and death. One particularly obtuse critic writes: "There may possibly be some way of using the sort of sado-masochistic relationship of Max and Lucia as a metaphor for the terrible interdependencies of torturer and victim in the concentration camps. Possibly, though I doubt it, Miss Cavani is less interested in the banality of evil or its psychology than in what she tries to picture as the eroticism of it." (Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, October 31, 1974)

Mr. Canby is dead wrong. What makes *The Night Porter* anything but a pornographic film is that pornography reduces all human experience to genital sexuality devoid of any creative, autonomous, and interpersonal implications, whereas art opens its content to many possibilities of meaning. Cavani's love story is not only the story of the relation between two individuals, but of the world around them, of the culture and history in which they exist, of the values, conflicts, and inner contradictions of a society which is, whether we want to see it or not, our own.

In the preface to the screenlay of *Il portiere di notte* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), Cavani tells of two women survivors of the Lager whom she had occasion to meet in 1965 when the Italian state-owned TV commissioned her to do a special on the women in the Resistance. One of these women, she writes,

had spent three years in Dachau (from age 18 to 21). She was not Jewish, but a partisan. This woman revealed to me something which I found extremely upsetting: since the war had ended, and life had resumed its normal routine, she always spent her summer vacations in Dachau. I asked her why she went there and not as far away from it as possible. She could not answer with sufficient clarity (perhaps she should have been Dostoyevsky), but her answer was already there, in her behavior: it was the victim

returning to the scene of the crime. Why? One must seek an answer in the unconscious. Another woman, from Milan, not Jewish, but a partisan and a bourgeois, survived Auschwitz. When I met her she was living just outside the city in a miserable low-rent house. I was surprised because her family was well-to do. She explained: after the war she had tried to go back to live at home with her family, to resume personal contact with former friends, but was unable to do it and went off on her own. Why? She was shocked, she explained, by the fact that after the war the world had again begun to function as if nothing had happened, in fact almost in a hurry to forget all things unpleasant and sad. Having returned alive from hell, she thought that people, knowing of what man is capable, would want to change radically. On the contrary, it happened that she became ashamed, in front of the others, for having survived, for being a live witness, and therefore the stinging memory of something embarrassing that everyone wanted to forget as quickly as possible. . . . What disturbed her most was the fact that in the camp she had discovered the depth of her own nature, that is to say, what good and what evil she was capable of. She underlined the word *evil*. She said she could not forgive the Nazis for making her aware of people's capacity for evil. But she gave me no details; she only told me not to expect a victim to be always innocent because a victim too is a person. (pp. vii-viii)

The need to investigate and reevaluate the cultural phenomenon of Nazism and fascism, which Cavani shares with a good many other young European artists, derives from her growing up in the boom decade of the fifties, when the memory of the war and of fascism was consciously and institutionally swept under the rug. If Europe had to be rebuilt with the help of US capitalism to serve as a bastion against Communism, not all ex-fascists and Nazis could be done away with—certainly not their major support institutions, the bureaucracy, the courts, and the church.

The film is set in 1957 Vienna. The last Soviet occupation troops have just left and the city picks itself up and goes on living its life as if nothing had happened. Happy days are here again. But pinning the blame on the Nuremberg criminals or hanging Mussolini upside down in a Milan square could not, and did not, bring about either purification or self-knowledge. The heritage of fascism remained and festered in the dark tenement houses and

luxury hotels of Europe; the ex-Nazis live on, inconspicuously, as does everyone who is black-mailed, won over by them, or simply sympathetic to the old cause. We owe it to people like Cavani and others who have sought out and brought to light the facts and fictions of the fascist culture, that we in the seventies can begin to reassess critically and dialectically the import of fascism and its continuing presence in our midst (see Herbert S. Levine, "Beyond Watergate: The Culture of Fascism," *Nation*, August 17, 1974).

Lucia and Max in *The Night Porter* are two people involved in the Nazi infamy, albeit at opposite ends, who cannot forget. In their obsessive repetition of past acts which once defined their total world and now reflect their self-image, they live out a fantasy which is the only relationship they know, the only one their brutal world ever made possible for them to know. Lucia and Max are self-aware and fully conscious, much more so than the ex-Nazis trying to come out of their closets, much more than the American conductor, Lucia's husband, for whom Vienna, like Lucia, is only a decorative backdrop for his stage performance. What does he know about the burden of Europe's and Lucia's past? But those who live with that burden, and carry it in their flesh, and know that it endures in them and around them, cannot but consciously re-play it to the fulfillment of ultimate regression and death. For them, time cannot go forward, it had already stopped long ago. Their time is as circular as that of the lovers in Mozart's *Magic Flute* duet, which Lucia's husband conducts as unaware of its ironic implications as he is unaware of his wife's conflicts. Mozart and Strauss (*Der Rosenkavalier* is what Bert dances to in the camp and later re-plays in his hotel room), and Lucia's popular song à la Marlene Dietrich are all part of the same culture, which like all cultures is complex, contradictory, humane and inhuman.

Critics like Joy Gould Boyum (*Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 1974) who were incensed by the implication that "those imprisoned by the Nazis share in their jailors' depravity" should read first-hand accounts of what happened to the camp inmates who survived (e.g., Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, New York: Collier Books, 1973). They would find out that depravity, cruelty, inhumanity were

taught and learnt there, and in fact they often were adaptive behavior necessary for survival. I would not conclude, however, as Gould Boyum does, that "victims, *The Night Porter* would have us believe, are just as guilty as their torturers." I think rather that victims probably *feel* guilty, as the survivor interviewed by Cavani honestly admits, and as women as a class know they feel.

Why then is this a woman's film? The way in which Lucia is victimized, the truth she discovers in herself and lives out, the imagery of her bondage to the Father (this is obviously the meaning of her being chained and hiding under the table), are a true metaphor, however magnified, of the female condition. That the same ambivalence exists in the Father, who is nonetheless, objectively, the oppressor, only makes the metaphor complete. The world is not made of the good and the bad like a Western. In the real world good and evil are inseparable; the only valid categories are right and wrong, and those are determined by history, by human consciousness and human choice.

One of the few American film critics who understood the worth and the meaning of *The Night Porter* is Molly Haskell. In her article "Are Women Directors Different" (*Village Voice*, February 3, 1975), Haskell easily disposes of the claims that Cavani's film is an erotic turn on, and goes on to address the more important question, is there such a thing as a feminine sensibility in film-making? She notes that both Cavani and Wertmüller are more sensual and more direct in their approach to sexuality than directors like Elaine May who "has more in common with such male compatriots as Mike Nichols"; she also notes that neither Cavani nor Wertmüller "works within the narrowly realistic or autobiographical modes that we might have expected from women directors." Moreover, she adds sarcastically, we do not observe any other indications of femininity such as "a wobbly camera, mismatched shots . . . a sudden lapse of continuity that might be explained by infirmities of a cyclical nature." Then, we conclude, whatever the *feminine sensibility* may be, it does not appear to be a viable or useful critical category per se. Granted. But then, if the criteria have nothing to do with style, subject matter, or technique, might they not consist of (1) ideological awareness (the film as a political

act addresses a class rather than an audience), and (2) personal, though not necessarily autobiographical, honesty on the part of the artist who, I'd say, has to be a woman?

The two directors who in fact are closest to Cavani's *Night Porter* are so not because of style or topic, but because they also are personally involved in their movies: Visconti, who endlessly debates his own ambivalence vis-à-vis tradition and revolution, decadence and regeneration; Bertolucci, who projects onto the screen the reflections of fantasies of impotence, failure, and impossible tenderness. *Last Tango in Paris* is indeed a sort of counterpart of *The Night Porter*, i.e., it is a man's film. The female character is but the Other on whom the male protagonist defines himself, and many women who saw it, like myself, felt personally uninvolved, objective, viewers at a distance. Yet they could understand and even sympathize—women know a lot about men because they have always been taught what men feel, need, desire, fear. It is not surprising that male viewers, on the contrary, cannot relate to *The Night Porter*: despite the fact that both Lucia and Max are protagonists (women do not conceive of men as objects), and that the film is truly and profoundly dialectic, the point of consciousness, the core of

perception, the sensor nerve is Lucia's. But I also know of women, some of them critics, who rejected *The Night Porter* as violently as they would exorcise the devil. It is understandable that women on the way to self-liberation find it so difficult to admit that Lucia's inner reality and her symbolic outer behavior are an appropriate, if metaphoric, representation of the female experience. It is a harsh, unadorned, cruel view of the depth of one's self. But the violent and total rejection of the film on the part of women who accepted, hailed, and empathized with *Last Tango in Paris* is clearly a measure of woman's alienation (I'm using the term literally, not broadly) from her self.

I don't think there is men's art and women's art, but art is a product of history and, as such, it is subject to cultural values as well as being a means to transform and to change them. It is the latter function of art that feminist artists and all revolutionary artists focus on in order to bring about socio-cultural change. Consciousness and a new self-image for women cannot be achieved by repression, exorcism, or ignorance of history past and present, any more than society can be freed of fascism without the honest and unrelentless critique of its more subtle ways and effects. I propose that this is what a woman's film does today.

**JOSEPH A. GOMEZ**

## Peter Watkins's Edvard Munch

Unlike the western, the musical, the horror film, the thriller, and most other movie genres, the biography film has never enjoyed much critical recognition. There are no books which deal in depth with the genre, and many film critics seem only too willing to exclude film biographies from serious discussion. Gary Arnold of the *Washington Post*, for instance, suggests that the composer biography is hardly worth reviewing because it is "one of the silliest of movie genres."<sup>1</sup>

When they are considered by critics, film biographies are almost universally pigeonholed into two categories: the romantic Hollywood popularization and the faithful, factual reconstruction. The best of the first type is epitomized by the numerous "biopics"—*The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1935), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), *Juarez* (1939), *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940), etc.—directed by William Dieterle for Warner Brothers, while the worst is embodied in the glossy, superficial schmaltz